



Serena Fusco
*Incorporations of Chineseness.
Hybridity, Bodies,
and Chinese American Literature*

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, Cambridge Scholars
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As Serena Fusco highlights in her latest publication, “incorporation” has at least a twofold interpretation. On the one hand, it denotes the process of becoming part of a larger whole (albeit not necessarily through conformity). On the other, it evokes the body, a corporeal matter, a visible, physical shape. The *Chineseness* of the title is located by the author at the intersection of these two meanings, whereby it becomes recognizable precisely at the moment of its incorporation into something else. In fact, as Fusco writes, «‘incorporation’ is a strategy of subjectivization that makes bodies into ‘living tools’ for absorbing and displaying visible signs of (cultural) difference at the moment when different cultural narratives, or claims of allegiance, intersect» (69).

Incorporations of Chineseness is structured into two main clusters. “Part I, Field to Text, 1974-2015” first focuses on the rise of the Asian American Studies field in the mid Seventies, through its heated debates and controversies in the following decades, to its spectacular intellectual and academic establishment in the Nineties. Fusco is interested in providing a fresh understanding of these defining moments by uncovering the crucial role played by Chinese America and «*Chineseness* as a transnational cultural category» (6). The latter half of this first cluster explores both gender as a crucial analytical



category in the Asian American critical debate, and the signification of the Chinese body (and the hybrid body) at the overlap and conflict between its private dimension and its public value. As Fusco argues, in the literature she examines «characters experience their bodies as spaces to negotiate the touch of the world, zones of conflict, performative tools, spaces where cultural interpellations and choice, self-articulation and collective accountability, overlap» (71).

The second part of the book (chapter 3, 4, and 5) is grouped under the title “Text to Field, 1956-1976.” It performs three acts of close readings on three novels written in the two decades preceding the official emergence of the Asian American cultural production, «against a backdrop of historical traumas and precarious conditions of tension, including the Cold War» (17). The belated success of all three novels provides a point of entry in the foundational instability of Asian American discourse vis à vis its interaction with the category of “chineseness”, and the changing representational politics of Chinese American women’s writing.

Chapter 3 focuses on *The Frontiers of Love* (1956) by Diana Chang, the first US-born Chinese American to publish a novel in English, who recuperated and mobilized a pre-existing tradition of representing Eurasianness, in a Cold War context. Chapter 4 investigates *Crossings* (1968) another English language novel written by the China-born Chinese American writer Chuang Hua, highlighting in particular its role in defining fundamental features in the future development of Asian American literature and ethnic consciousness, namely the complex relation between Asian and Asian American, a major turning point in the cultural debate in the late Sixties, and between individual and community in a woman’s path toward self-expression. Chapter 5 is a study of a Chinese-language novel, *Sangqing yu Taohong* by Nie Hualing (1976), translated into English in 1988 as *Mulberry and Peach*. Fusco interprets its arguably allegorical evocation of traumatic events in XX Century Chinese history as «testifying a circular rhetoric that prompts a reconnection to a certain ‘version’ (in cultural or political terms) of the homeland in order to be accepted in a new context» (19).

Fusco's work is a brilliantly rich inter- and multi-disciplinary contribution to Asian American studies, Chinese studies, and comparative literature. While departing from the Asian American discourse and its literary and cultural debates, the author moves away from the national and linguistic boundaries of the United States towards a discussion of Asian transnationalism and, in particular, Chinese diaspora, investigating what writing "China" may mean. «I attempt to historicize the centripetal pull of the Chinese diaspora and simultaneously to dig vertically, in historical terms, on the two sides of the Pacific» (21). In order to succeed in her attempt, Fusco mobilizes an impressive theoretical and critical bibliography, in both English and in Chinese.

In addition to the excellently productive critical move to contextually scrutinize understudied literary works written in a pivotal era for Asian Americans, the author here draws on narratology and feminist theory, philosophy and semiotics, to critique American neoliberal multiculturalism and to assess the multilayered functions performed by the body as the ground on which Americanness and Chineseness converge and may clash.

Fusco's unique contribution to the several fields she interpellates is most visible in her interrogation of the formation of Asia American literature from a Chinese diasporic perspective. This ex-centric perspective allows for a distancing and refocusing that ultimately reveals some unexplored «contradictions that have always been there—of which the *incorporation of China* [...] is part and parcel» (10).

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